

Local Authority in the Han Dynasty:

Focus on the *Sanlao*

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This thesis is the result of a research candidature conducted with another University as part of a collaborative Doctoral degree.

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Abstract: Local Authority in the Han Dynasty

This thesis examines the social structure and culture of the Han dynasty, with a focus on a type of local authority that played a supplementary role in the Han administrative structure and a vital role in cultural construction: the *Sanlao*.

The social position of the *Sanlao* originated in the Zhou dynasty, and gradually became the title for local non-official leaders during the Spring and Autumn period. The rescript issued in the second year of the reign of the Emperor Gaozu of the Han dynasty shows that local people were appointed by the government as *Sanlao* at county and township levels. This means that the *Sanlao* were recognised in their appointment by the imperial court and participated in the bureaucratic system as semi-officials. During the reign of the Emperors Gaozu, Wen, and Jing, the essential function of the *Sanlao* in local areas was to maintain social stability, mentor local officials and mediate conflicts among commoners.

The *Sanlao* first played a role as advisors, where they provided vital information for the decision-making process throughout the government hierarchy. Case studies show that they acted as remonstrators, persuaders and critics by providing information directly to emperors. Secondly, they mentored local officials with local knowledge to assist with governing affairs. This was based on their experience in local areas and they worked with the Upright and Elder officials to change the governing practice of the Han dynasty. Thirdly, they acted as mediators to resolve conflicts between people and helped local officials in legal affairs. *Sanlao* also worked as local leaders involved in witnessing wills and appealing to filial piety and fraternal duty to settle lawsuits. Seen from these perspectives, *Sanlao* can be viewed as providing an important assistant role in governance.

Sanlao first emerged spontaneously as folk leaders during the Spring and Autumn Period and then gradually became the intermediary popular authority of local societies bridging the gap between the state bureaucracy and the population. The institutionalised *Sanlao* system played a vital role in keeping society stable during the Han dynasty.

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